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THE ANNALS OF THREE TAME HERMIT
THRUSHES.

BY CORDELIA J. STANWOOD.

When I took the nest in Linscott's Meadow containing the three young Thrushes, and was about to put it in my basket, the bottom of the nest fell out (Aug. 17, 1909, 9 a. m.). After a hasty examination of the nest, which was abnormal in some respects, I tossed the rim away, covered the little birds in the basket, and hurried from the neighborhood. The mother bird still called softly in the distance, *chuck!chuck!* Her remonstrances were few and gentle, however.

I had come to the conclusion that in order to make a successful study of young birds, a person needed to take two, at least. One would serve as a companion and mirror for the other. They would be less timid of their kind when returned to the woods, and less inclined to become pets; I hoped, also, to secure a singer.

The birds were small, and the third, a particularly fragile little thing. The fact that they were a second or third brood of the season may have accounted for their apparent lack of vitality.

It was a hard journey of six miles or more from my home to the nest and back again. The nest, as I intimated in the beginning, was peculiar. I felt that I would like to examine it, and yet that I could not return for that purpose. The smallest bird I would like to have dispensed with, but he was too immature to drive from the nest. I decided to take all the birds and the nest for further study, when the nest collapsed. Thus it was that I set out from Linscott's Meadow with three little Thrushes in my basket.

The nestlings showed no signs of fear. I was adopted for a mother by them from the time of my interference. They ate grasshoppers ravenously, and went to sleep on being fed. On the way home they partook of from twelve to fifteen grasshoppers and twelve blueberries.

The tail feathers were started, many bits of quill casings



Nest of Hermit Thrush

still remained on the feathers, and much natal down still clung to the tips of the feathers. I decided that they were about eight days old.

Although my examination of the dwelling place of these little Thrushes had been so cursory, I saw that the foundation of the nest was made almost entirely of sphagnum moss (*Sphagnum acutifolium*), which had been gathered and modelled while wet. The nest when dry was almost as firm and brittle as the mud cup of the Robin. The lining consisted of the orange setae of hair cap moss (*Polytrichum commune*) and hair cap moss itself, and yet a white pine grew within three or four yards of the nest; this was the first structure made by a Hermit Thrush that I had ever found without white pine needles in its lining. By 11 a. m. I was at home with the Thrush family. The birds took readily to ants' eggs, and bread and milk, as well as grasshoppers. They required a great deal more water than the Olive-backed Thrush would take.

The same large packing box that I used for the Olive-backed Thrush served as a bird house. In one end soft cotton wadding afforded a comfortable bed, in the other, a lilac branch met the requirements of a perch, and still a corner large enough was left to contain a fresh garden of earth and plants in a platter.

The birds were still in the nest stage and preferred to snuggle in a heap on the soft batting to sitting on a branch. They could not perch or stand for any length of time. They soon became so accustomed to the house that my footsteps on the hard floor did not awaken them.

The second day, at 4:30 a. m., the Thrushes called for food for the first time. I gave them a fresh linen towel to nestle on. Toward night they seemed nearly as active as the Olive-backed Thrush when ten days old. One lifted his foot and scratched his ear twice.

On the third day, when the little Hermits were really ten days old, they began to perch and fly. They also began to raise and lower their little stub-like tails.

The fourth day I left a little Hermit in the window sunning himself. When I returned a few moments later he was standing on the mantle in the shade.

I closed both shutters of one window, left the window up, and covered the ledge with fresh towels. The sun shone on the outside of the blind, and the birds nestled on the linen in blissful content. They fluttered and twittered for food, but were really too lazy to eat much. I learned for the first time that a bird sleeps a great deal with one eye open.

Before I brought the birds home I laid in a supply of food¹ for them, such as pin cherries, blueberries, grasshoppers, and ants' eggs.

From the fourth to the ninth day the Thrushes developed rapidly. It had occurred to me to give them a platter of earth from an abandoned ant hill for a dust bath. They spent much time snuggled down in the dust or in the moss of the garden. During the fifth and sixth days I fed the Thrushes three ounces of steak, or one and one-half ounces a day. In this time they had also eaten considerable bread and milk, fifteen helpings of banana as large as a good-sized gooseberry, eighteen grasshoppers, two earthworms, three spiders, eighteen blueberries, twelve flies, two wild pears, four pin cherries, ten blackberries, and one-hundred-and-twenty ants' eggs. In addition to this I found that some of the birds were picking up blueberries and blackberries for themselves. They were perfectly healthy young birds.

As time passed I was more and more astonished to see how birds in the same nest differ in ability to fly, grasp food with the beak, pick up food, timidity and friendliness. One of the young birds seemed very independent, often seeking a perch by himself. The others generally cuddled down together and flew to the same perch. The smallest, up to the eighth day, was almost powerless to grasp anything with his beak; he relied

¹At this season ants' eggs were scarce. I found them in but one hill. At this date, however, the female grasshopper is very nourishing, being full of eggs. See "Nature Study and Life." By Hodge.



Hermit Thrush, about seven days old
Photo by Embert C. Osgood



Hermit Thrush, about ten days old

on me entirely to put food almost down his throat, but he was a most gentle, affectionate little bird. The strongest would catch a fly on the window, or spring into the air after it. One bird ate so many blueberries from the cup that they made him ill, and one bird was always in the box picking up ants' eggs. The largest bird ate more or less earth from the dust bath.

All the birds were peculiarly winsome. They were sensitive to the slightest caress, and constantly expressed their affection by snuggling down in my lap, my hand, or against my throat. They alighted on my head and shoulders.

When I took the Thrushes I determined to study their characteristics thoroughly, but I realized that I must avoid petting them too much if I were to return them to the woods in an independent condition. For this reason I avoided caressing them.

When one Thrush called in a clear, sweet whistle, *p-e-e-p!* *p-e-e-p!* another would answer with a soft, husky, breathing sound, *phée, phée*. Occasionally one would call *pit! pit! pit!* an almost inaudible, ventriloquial call. They also used the call note *chuck!*

The ninth day after I brought the Thrushes home I put one in the woods for a short time. He seemed dazed, at first, at his outdoor surroundings. He listened to the murmuring of the leaves, the sighing of the breeze among the tree tops; he noticed the swaying of the ferns and grasses. Once in a while he snapped at a mosquito or an ant, but he was so well fed that mostly he was content to snuggle down among the dry leaves and just look.

At the end of two-and-one-half hours I returned to the woods for him. I called, "Come Pet!" A silvery little *peep!* came in answer. The young Thrush had moved but a few feet. The next four days I carried all the Thrushes to the woods for all or part of the day.

At this age a young Hermit Thrush is olive-brown above, speckled with golden-buffy. The tail is rufous, and the tail coverts, a very bright rufous. The throat is slightly buffy, the up-

per breast is buffy and the lower breast and belly are silvery white. The breast is heavily spotted with black. The black scollaps on the buffy sides of the young are so lightly penciled on the feathers that they have the effect of a gray tinge. The throat is lined with yellow. The eye is hazel in the light, and black in shadow. The legs and feet are a mixture of flesh-color and brown-gray. The upper mandible is gray-brown, the lower manible flesh-colored, save the tip, which is gray-brown. The tail is about one inch long. The whole effect of the coloring is soft, rich, and elegant.

When the three Thrushes went to the woods for the first time, they were at first attracted by the sounds of nature and the motions of the foliage. Soon one went to the boiling spring and walked into a little pool. Evidently the water was not fresh enough for he threaded the rill that issued from the spring almost to its source before he took a bath between the rocks. His crest stood erect with delight as he splashed the water about. He had such fun that he came back to bathe several times. Another Thrush circled around and perched high in a tree, but the baby did nothing, just stood still.

At last I put him in a shallow pool and rippled the water with my hand. He shook his feathers as if taking a bath, and dipped his beak, but was afraid to sit down in the water. He went on taking imaginary baths on every little mudbank, but refused to wet a feather.

Later in the afternoon the Thrushes were feeding around the spring, when suddenly the cows came running down the path. Two of the Thrushes disappeared like a flash into the underbrush, but the baby sat on a log. A cow came up and smelled of him, and for aught I know would have eaten him, had I not run at her brandishing a long stick.

In a few hours we were in the house again. The Thrushes were ravenously hungry and very active on the wing. It was a joy to see them move. They floated around the room like bits of thistle down. One Thrush flew from the box of ants' eggs, when I went to feed the birds, and pecked at the



Hermit Thrush, twenty days old
Photo by Embert C. Osgood

paper containing the steak. Another pecked at the cup that held the water.

The thirteenth day after I took them, I put them in an evergreen woods above the spring for the day. When they returned to the house, they ate so fast that I no longer dared to feed them with the scissors. They pinched my fingers in their beaks several times in spite of my efforts to be dexterous. Their beaks were so sensitive that although I thought the floor was immaculate, the Thrushes constantly found dust and hairs. They were not very hungry after their day out-of-doors. I decided that they were ready to go to the woods. Accordingly, the next morning, August 30, at 7 o'clock, I carried a basin of fresh water to the wooded pasture above the house where persons were not likely to find it, and freed the little birds there. Beside the basin I put a supply of ants' eggs and grasshoppers.

The following morning I renewed the water, and the supply of food. I saw nothing of the young Thrushes and refrained from calling them. Each day I renewed the supply of food and changed the water. On the fourth day after the return of the birds to the woods, a little Thrush alighted on a bracken near me as I changed the water. He flew away from me, but I think that I could have caught him, in time, had not the undergrowth been so dense. September 14 I came upon two Thrushes by the boiling spring that kept together. They flew up onto a high branch and called *chuck!* as all Hermit Thrushes do. They seemed to haunt the locality where the tame Thrushes were freed the first time. There was a third bird near. I was unable to see him distinctly. I do not know whether he was a Thrush or not.

Although persons came and went at this spring all day where the Thrushes and Robins came to drink and bathe, no one boasted of having seen a tame Thrush that perched on his shoulder and begged for food. I thought that this fact proved that my experiment was a success.